

MAKING HAY IN DHAKA

Festivity, poetry and intellectual deliberations were in the air, as hundreds of writers, artists and readers from different walks of life gathered at the Bangla Academy premises for the second-day of the Hay Festival Dhaka.

Visitors partook in varied presentations and panel discussions, exploring a diversity of nuanced topics such as contemporary women's writings, tales of liberation and the politics of translation.

Recitations, readings, performances and folk music on the lawn lent the erudite event an interactive and vibrant look.



PHOTO: STAR

A Suitable Rendezvous with Vikram Seth

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Perhaps no one commanded as much attention at the Hay Festival Dhaka yesterday as the inimitable writer, Vikram Seth. Hundreds of people lined up outside the new auditorium of the Bangla Academy to have a glimpse of the versatile author, best known for his colossal novel, "A Suitable Boy", and other acclaimed works such as "The Golden Gate", "An Equal Music" and "Two Lives".

In a lively conversation with his old friend and publisher, David Davdar, Seth talked about his life, novels, poetry and philosophies. Witty, charming and incisive, he mesmerised the audience with each of his answers, sending us into fits of laughter at one second, and moments of retrospection at the next.

When asked how Seth balances writing against the grain (he did, after all, write a novel

in verse and the most colossal novel in the English language) and ambition or success, the author joked, "I square the two simply by not trying."

"If I write against the grain, I am perfectly happy to write with the grain. I have no particular feeling that one should be subversive, or one should conform. Neither of those interests me," said Seth. "What interests me is... if I am inspired by something, I should then follow it and not be bothered by either view: whether it is reactionary, or passé, whether it's such an adventurous thing to do that people are going to be astounded because it is something new or because it is such a conformist thing to do that people are immediately going to say, yes, this fits into a particular niche and hence it is going to sell a thousand copies. None of that interests me."

He explained that if Mahesh Kapoor in "A Suitable Boy" had not been a minister whose close friends owned large amounts of land, then land reform would not have featured prominently in the book. "It is within the ambit of the novel that these issues have to be involved," he said.

However, as a person who is deeply interested in politics and who spent the formative years of his life studying economics, politics and philo-

ophy, he often finds he has to restrain himself from putting too much politics in his writing when it's not due. On issues that he feels passionately about, such as the Babri Masjid attacks or the gay rights movement in India, Seth said, "I do pick up activism then; not as a writer necessarily, but as a citizen."

Seth shared that he is a shy person in general and likes to steer clear from too much public scrutiny. He insists that he does not usually go to festivals and would have turned it down had it not been for his desire to visit Bangladesh.

His mother's only advice to him about visiting Bangladesh was "Relish Ilishi" joked Seth. However, he quite diplomatically evaded answering Davdar's light-hearted question whether the 'Padma Ilishi' or 'Ganga Ilishi' is better, saying that he does not wish to offend anybody and be struck!

Seeth feels that a novelist should not infuse his/her own political interests in the novel so much that it seems forced. "I won't generalise for other writers, because different writers have different balance of the public and the private in their works. My concern is that you can't inject your interest in land reform, or women's rights or communal tolerance or gender issue write large or anything, unless and I'm talking about novels -- unless it is an obsession of the characters themselves."



PHOTO: STAR

More than Assassinations In conversation with Mohammed Hanif

BARNALI SAHA

Pakistani writer-journalist Mohammed Hanif whose first novel "A Case of Exploding Mangoes" - a dark satire based on the plane crash that killed General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, former president of Pakistan -- won the 2009 Commonwealth Book Prize in the Best First Book category was at the Hay Festival Dhaka yesterday. The Daily Star caught up with the writer.

First impressions of the Dhaka Hay Festival? Hanif: It turned out to be a great experience for me. I am loving the buzz here. The participants and the crowd are bursting with enthusiasm. I, however, have a feeling that I want to learn more about the mainstream literature scene of Bangladesh. In my head, 'Bangla' literature was any literature done in Bangladesh or created from a Bangladeshi writer's experience. Here, I think Bangla being the name of a language represents the huge pool of literature done in that language, and I have to say that I wish there were a bigger representation of that pool here. The language barrier can be an alienating factor for writers. You see, writers themselves are typically alien to the real life. Yet, once that barrier is broken, it feels as if a lone traveller has found more companions on his journey for a small fraction of time. This can be an incredibly enriching experience. I am glad that I am here today.

Your panel discussion on 'Assassination and



Mohammed Hanif

PHOTO: STAR

Conspiracy' was a fun show! However, as a writer, do you compartmentalise yourself in the confines of such categories (e.g. conspiracy, human rights, subcontinental)?

Hanif: No. As a writer, you may choose to concentrate on a certain genre or a certain type of topics or a style of narration; such categorisation, however, does not exist in a real writer's head. For a writer, an inspiration can come anywhere, and putting it in a pigeonhole will

strangle that inspiration to death. However, in such literary festivals and discussions, such categorisations are convenient because the audiences are divided in differing interests. Say, if there is a category called 'New Writers', may be a lot of would-be or fresh writers will be encouraged to relate to the issue and enrich themselves thereby. But if you ask me if at this point I would identify myself as a writer of conspiracy novels, I would say no.

At the discussion, a significant part of your time was spent on your book "A Case of Exploding Mangoes", which had the assassination of President Zia ul-Haq as the central theme. In a way it dealt with a part of Pakistan's history, though it is completely a work of fiction. You said that a lot of readers took the fiction for real. In Bangladesh, we have also seen debates on whether work of fiction dealing with historic events/characters should stick to reality. What is your take on that?

Hanif: See, I think the role of a novel is very unclear but I can tell you what the role of a novel definitely is not. And that is teaching people history. Literature and history are two different disciplines and they deal with different parts of the human mind, I am pretty sure. Therefore, expecting fictional literature to provide history lessons is quite unrealistic. Still why does a novel have to bear the burden of that expectation? I believe that's because modern novels are a comparatively new form of human expression. As more decades are spent by the humankind

reading and appreciating novels, I believe the expectations will be more realistic. This is particularly true for the subcontinent.

Why is it so? Is it because a big part of the subcontinental history is still unresolved in the public mind?

Hanif: Being a journalist, I know that any history is unresolved. Histories are not like novels, but one of the biggest similarities history has with literature is that there is no perfect ending or resolution.

We want to know a bit about Pakistani readers...

Hanif: In Pakistan, there are several languages. And I think therefore there is a bigger group that reads Pakistani English literature than those that read Urdu literature. Guess what my mother tongue is? No, it's not Urdu. It is Punjabi. So I first learnt Urdu in my early school days; and then I was taught English in late high school years. Then again the quality of language teaching was not that great. It took me heaps of reading (of books in English) and a journalism career of 10 years to be able to write in English. I wish there were more English translation of Pakistani and Bangladeshi books of local language available.

Speaking at the discussion, Das said the reason that drove her to make the film was the frustration and helplessness of not being able to deal with the mindless cruelty that had touched her so deeply, and the prejudice that she found lingering on when she scratched the surface of the so-called liberal minds. The film portrays the after-effects of the carnage that seeps into the lives of those affected. Sheding light on different perspectives of the scar that the incident left, on different levels of the society and the people belonging to them, was the target of the story, Nandita said.

Catherine Masud co-wrote and produced

Storytellers share tales of their quests Nandita Das and Catherine Masud discuss filmmaking

FAHMIM FERDous

"I'm not really an ambitious actor. What draws me more is the scope to narrate stories, because there are so many stories waiting to be told" -- Nandita Das summed up her journey from being an actress to an award-winning filmmaker in very few words, speaking yesterday morning at the Hay Festival Dhaka. At the literary festival, being held at the Bangla Academy premises, Das and Catherine Masud shared their insights, philosophies and experiences as directors.

Das made her directorial debut with "Firaq" in 2008, after establishing herself as an able actress. The story, against the backdrop of the communal violence in Gujarat, India in 2002, premiered at the Toronto Film Festival 2008, and won numerous Indian and international awards.

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Catherine Masud said that despite their background in documentary filmmaking, Tareque Masud and she decided



PHOTO: STAR

to venture into a fiction, driven by Tareque's childhood experiences as a madrasa student during the increasing tensions in the then East Pakistan which culminated in the Liberation War. It was not easy to make a documentary that could efficiently encapsulate all the subjects; a feature film was better suited for this. The film shows scope of debate and different opinions even in the small bounds of the madrasa, Catherine said, adding that it was

Liberating Words from the Confines of Language

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Yesterday, at the Hay Festival Dhaka, a session on 'Translating' was held with participating writers Mahmud Rahman, Anisul Hoque, Shaheen Akhtar and Kaiser Haq.

The session started with distinguishing the translator panelists from the writer panelists: Mahmud Rahman and Kaiser Haq have translated literature from Bangla to English, whereas Anisul Hoque and Shaheen Akhtar have had their translated works published. Professor Fakrul Alam of English Department, Dhaka University, chaired the discussion.

Mahmud Rahman had his translated work "Black Ice" published by Harper Collins India. The Bangla original novel was written by Mahmudul Haq, and is called "Kalo Boro". Rahman was drawn to Haq's work after reading an inspirational interview of, and after hours of interaction with, the otherwise reclusive Haq. The decision to translate "Kalo Boro" started from that point.

Anisul Hoque said that the English translation of his work got initiated rather accidentally. His first translator was an Odissi reader who read his novel "Ma" online. It was an Odia translation published from Bhubaneswar, India. Later, Vaskar Ray, then working at The Times of India, Delhi proactively decided to translate the novel in English. Though Ray found the story of "Ma" more gripping than most translated literature at that time, it was not easy to get a publisher in India for the translated novel. So determined was Ray to get the translation published, he left his full-time job at The Times of India, joined as CEO of a publishing house, and got the work published. According to Anisul Hoque, a lot of proactive passion is needed from the translator to recognise the potential of an original work of fiction.

Shaheen Akhtar's renowned Bangla novel "Talaash" was written against the backdrop of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Zuban, an Indian publisher, selected the story to be published in English. Akhtar feels that a writer can never be fully satisfied with a translation, and specifically in the case of her novel, a Bangladeshi translator could add more value. Connecting with the background of the 1971 war was important in this case. Also Bangla as a language takes a different form when one travels from Bangladesh to West Bengal. Finally, "Talaash" was translated by a Bangladeshi translator Shabnam Nadia, and after 7 years, it got published from Zuban. Though the sales figures of translated books in question are not very encouraging yet, Akhtar thinks the long-term market for such books gets bigger through translation.

Akhtar feels that a lot of cultural nuances get lost in translation, and Anisul Hoque agrees that not every fiction can be 'universal' in its cognition, though the appeal can be universal.

Kaiser Haq translated a lot of works of Rabindranath Tagore. He also did a lot of 'translations of translations'. In his initial years as a translator, he was drawn to Tagore's novella "Chaturanga", and he translated it. He recently translated Nasreen Jahan's "Urukku". According to him, it is important for a translator to engage with the mother tongue of the writer while translating. Languages have some realistic barriers between each other, and for bridging that gap, a translator has to have a lot of heart invested in the original language of the fiction.

The participants mostly agreed that finding a translator is not a writer's job. On the contrary, if a fiction is true to itself, it will find interesting avenues and new channels of getting published -- in other languages or other geographic locations.

10:05	Text Match (Live)	11:00	Duronto Khabar
07:10	Drama Serial: Lolona	03:05	Music Hour
08:35	Drama: Shwpono Dina	10:15	Prime Time
10:30	Pranay Mone Ontrey	11:15	Shobor Upore Desh
		12:30	Maasranga Television
			Diganta TV
01:25	Prapok	12:30	Duronto Khabar
03:05	Bangla Feature Film	03:05	Post-mortem
08:40	Drama Serial: Shongshor	08:00	Houseful
	Kaiser Haq Bednar	11:20	Dance Programme
	Gun-e		CHANNEL 1
		01:05	Bangla Feature Film
		06:20	The Traffic Signal
		09:35	Hridoye Mati O Manush
		11:30	Drama Serial: Roshi
			CHANNEL 9
		01:05	Bangla Feature Film
		06:20	Back to Back
		09:30	Classic Cartoon
		11:15	Beauty Time
			CHANNEL 24
		09:30	Housewife
		08:10	Eto Jibon
		09:00	Uphug

12:30	abc radio FM 89.2	02:00	Foorti Unlimited
12:20	Campus Campus	06:00	Bumper to Bumper
07:20	GP Launch	10:00	Back to Back Music
07:45	Megh Barata	10:30	RADIO TODAY FM 89.6
08:10	Adda	06:00	Green FM
09:30	Love Hour	09:00	Good Morning
11:10	Premog	11:00	Dhaka
11:30	Premog	12:00	World Music
08:00	Addabazi	04:00	U Turn
		07:00	Tobe Tai Hik

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